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# ON DNA, CULTURE AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: THEORISING 'JEWISH GENETICS'

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In June 2010 two papers appeared in major scientific journals - *Nature* and the *American Journal of Human Genetics* – which attempted to address the question about the “genetic structure” of the Jewish people (Behar et al 2010; Atzmon et al 2010). Both papers set out to assess the degree of Jewish communities’ “genetic” relatedness to each other and to their non-Jewish neighbours, and to explore whether the origin of contemporary Jews could be traced to the Middle East. Atzmon et al. examined seven Jewish populations and concluded that their “[genetic] comparison with non-Jewish groups demonstrated distinctive Jewish population clusters, each with shared Middle Eastern ancestry, proximity to contemporary Middle Eastern populations, and variable degrees of European and North African admixture”. More specifically, the paper states that the study it is based on “refuted large-scale genetic contributions of Central and Eastern European and Slavic populations to the formation of Ashkenazi Jewry” (2010: 850). Behar et al. suggest in a similar vein that the results of their study “trace the origin of most Jewish Diaspora communities to the Levant” (2010: 238).

These papers contribute to a sizeable body of genetic research that has endeavoured to test the account of Jewish history, according to which contemporary Jews are genealogically connected to ancient Hebrews. This research has added a new dimension to the debate about what it means to be Jewish, injecting new meanings into the “ethnic” discourse about Judaism and Jewish culture.

In academic Jewish Studies any essentialist conceptualisations of Jewish identity have in the past decades been challenged by commentators coming from

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this paper were presented at the international conference on Biohistories: DNA and bones in cultures of remembrance (Zurich, October 2010). I would like to thank the audiences for their feedback, and I am particularly grateful to Marianne Sommer and Gesine Kruger for their in-depth discussion of this material.

the perspective of critical theory, who generally see theoretical foundations of essentialist thinking as problematic. Thus, Laurence Silberstein drawing upon Judith Butler's formulation has suggested an approach which reconfigures such contested terms as *Jew*, *Judaism* and *Jewish* into a site of 'permanent openness and resignifiability' (Silberstein 2000: 13). Sander Gilman argues that 'there is no such thing as a "purely" Jewish identity', and that 'from the prebiblical world to the Babylonian Diaspora to the world of Sepharad or Ashkenaz, Jews – like all people – have formed themselves within as well as against the world that they inhabited, that they defined, and that defined them' (Gilman 1994: 365). In Israel, further complexity to the question about Jewish cultural (and regional) diversity is added by the fact that society is divided into various *edot*, or groups of repatriates from different parts of the world, who maintain the cultural and social specificities imported from their counties of origin.

Nevertheless, the idea that different Jewish groups around the world are not only culturally similar, but also 'genealogically' connected, is still prominent in the public imagination both within and outside Jewish communities. The notion that Jews are a people almost 'biologically' related to each other has been promoted by early Zionist ideologues. The racialisation of Jewishness in Zionist discourse was a response to the shift from Christian anti-Semitism to racial anti-Semitism, which occurred in Europe in the late nineteenth century. This new wave of anti-Jewish sentiment grounded many of the old-standing stereotypes about the Jews in their physicality and therefore aimed to close the door to assimilation (Weikart 2006). As John Efron comments, in Europe this effected the emergence of 'race science' in the Jewish communities themselves, who saw in it 'a new, "scientific" paradigm and agenda of Jewish self-definition and self-perception' (Efron 1994). The notion of Jewish people being on some level related to each other appears to be alive and well also in our days. Writing about contemporary constructions of Jewishness among the Jews in the West and particularly in the USA, Susan Glenn has observed that even 'in our post-ethnic age of "voluntarism", it is hard to ignore 'the centrality of blood logic to modern Jewish identity narratives,' the logic, which Jews retained 'throughout all of the de-racializing stages of twentieth-century social thought' (Glenn 2002: 139-140).

It is against the backdrop of these debates about the genealogical dimension of Jewishness that I would like to consider studies in what is sometimes popularly described as ‘Jewish genetics’. Have these studies and their results had any weight in public debates about Jewish identity? Has DNA become a new ‘marker’ of Jewishness and an aspect of Jewish culture? Has genetics come to play any role in specific cases involving issues of identity arbitration in the context of ‘emerging’ Jewish communities?<sup>2</sup>

My discussion is based on an analysis of in-depth interviews with seven key scientists involved in population genetic research,<sup>3</sup> and of three examples of the way this research became indexed in debates about Jewish identity. The first two come from Jerusalem and reflect the opinion of the co-director of the Centre for Kohanim, an organisation established to promote awareness of priestly heritage and duties among cozens and levites<sup>4</sup>, and of the chairman of Shavei Israel (Hebrew for ‘Israel Returns’) – a charity which assists isolated Jewish communities in connecting to Jewish culture and migrating to the State of Israel.<sup>5</sup> The third case study highlights the way genetic research has been received and interpreted by the community of the Bene Ephraim – a Judaising group of Andhra Pradesh (India).

I will focus on the ‘mismatch’ between the argument about genetics being not much more than a new tool for reconstructing Jewish history, espoused by scientists and some lay commentators, and the perception of it being a ‘litmus test’ of Jewishness demonstrated by members of Judaising communities. The paper will address this discrepancy in the way genetics is represented by different agents and will argue that in order to understand the meanings that DNA research has acquired in the context of Jewish tradition, it may be helpful to explore how it contributed to constructions of Jewish

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term “emerging” Jewish communities from Kulanu, an American organisation aiming to help communities which embraced Jewish identity in modern times. In academic literature these communities have also been described as Judaising movements (for a detailed discussion see Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002). Some such groups adopted Jewish religious beliefs and practices without claiming Jewish descent (for instance, the Jews of San Nicandro, Italy), others produced an origin narrative connecting them to the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel or other Jewish groups (see Parfitt 2002, Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002, Ben-Dor Benite 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of maintaining anonymity of my informants I will not disclose their names and institutional affiliation.

<sup>4</sup> The Cohens and the Levites are two priestly lines in Judaism. The status of a Cohen or a Levite is transmitted from father to son. [http://www.cohen-levi.org/the\\_center/the\\_center.htm](http://www.cohen-levi.org/the_center/the_center.htm).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.shavei.org>.

historical memory. I will suggest that though so far there is no indication that DNA tests are likely to be used in determining Jewish identity either on group or communal basis, this kind of genetic research may contribute to what I describe as 'biologisation' of Jewish culture and historical narrative in the public discourse.

But first, a few words to set the background of wider theoretical debates in Science and Technology Studies – a field in social sciences which will be of particular relevance to our discussion – and their specificity within the study of Jewish history.

## **DNA AND HISTORY**

Studies in 'Jewish genetics' belong to a much larger field which became to be known as genetic anthropology,<sup>6</sup> an area of genetics which aims to reconstruct the history of human migrations and cast light on the early history of groups with 'unclear origins' (Brodwin 2002, Davis 2004, Elliott 2003, Johnston 2003). Scientists involved in such studies tend to portray their work as a neutral and objective contribution to historical research, a novel way of doing history by using the methods of genetics.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, scholars coming from the perspective of social sciences and humanities disciplines have suggested that this work indicates a worrying trend in DNA research, as they appear to naturalise social and cultural differences (Abu El-Haj 2007, Palmie 2007, Palsson 2007, Reardon 2005, Simpson 2000, Skinner 2006, Smart et al 2008).

Some social scientists have paid particular attention to the way genetic anthropology has engaged with issues of personal and communal modes of self-identification, narratives of origin, and notions of relatedness. It has been lucidly demonstrated that such DNA studies are often informed by pre-existing cultural and political discourses about the meaning of histories that they endeavour to reconstruct, and that in the imagination of the tested and their observers the genetic markers 'assigned' to populations in the course of this research are likely

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<sup>6</sup> Genetic research aimed at reconstructing the history of human migrations is also sometimes referred to as anthropological genetics and genetic history. For an excellent historical discussion of the emergence and early development of the field, see Sommer 2008.

<sup>7</sup> For analysis of these attitudes among scientists see Abu El-Haj 2004, Egorova 2010, Sommer 2008 and 2010.

to be re-inscribed as markers of social identification. To give an example related to the history of Jewish genetics, Nurit Kirsh has argued that Israeli scientists involved in such studies in the 1950s almost unconsciously internalized Zionist ideology, which found expression in their work trying to prove the common origin of various Jewish groups around the world (2003). Nadia Abu El-Haj cites the example of genetic research on the Lemba<sup>8</sup> - a Judaising group in southern Africa, whose claims to Jewish origin have received a positive response from geneticists, and suggests that the genetic study that established a 'biological' connection between the Lemba and the Jews has paved the way for their recognition by a number of Jewish organisations and educational charities (Abu El-Haj 2004).<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, other commentators have pointed out that the genetic knowledge hardly superseded communal traditions or led to the emergence of new forms of belonging, which would be completely at odds with those already in existence. Thus, Nikolas Rose suggests that 'ideas about biological, biomedical, and genetic identity will certainly infuse, interact, combine and contest with other identity claims,' but they can hardly be expected ever to supplant them (2007: 113). Alondra Nelson in her study of the genetic ancestry tests offered to African American and Black British citizens, has convincingly argued that those who do these tests in an attempt to establish which part of Africa their ancestors may be from, do not accept their results at face value but re-interpret them in light of their own 'genealogical aspirations'. Nelson therefore suggests that 'while the geneticization of race and ethnicity may be the basic logic of genetic genealogy testing, it is not necessarily its inexorable outcome' (2008: 761). Reflecting on the role that genetic anthropology has played in (re)construction of collective and individual pasts, Marianne Sommer observes that '[w]e have only just begun to understand the complex processes at work when DNA technologies enter into cultures of remembrance. Nonetheless, our current knowledge points towards the importance of the history and diversity of these cultures for the ways in which communities may or may not come to (re) imagine themselves in

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<sup>8</sup> For the scientific papers based on this research, see Thomas et al. 2000.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of genetic research on the Lemba see Parfitt and Egorova 2006. For a general discussion of Lemba origins see Parfitt 1997.

terms of new genetically based histories and in relation to biosocialities, which may or may not (re) form around genetic markers of ancestry' (2010: 387).

To return to the context of genetic research on the Jews, it has also been noted that it is too early to suggest that genetic constructions of a common Jewish origin are superseding other definitions of being Jewish. Thus, Barbara Prainsack and Yael Hashiloni-Dolev have argued that new discoveries in Jewish genetics have mostly remained without any political or practical consequences (2009). It has been demonstrated that in case of the Lemba, as well as of some other 'emerging' Jewish communities, DNA evidence did not play any role in defining their *halakhic* status<sup>10</sup> or their eligibility for making an *aliyah*<sup>11</sup> to the State of Israel (Parfitt and Egorova 2006, Prainsack and Hashiloni-Dolev 2009).

This paper continues the discussion about the naturalising effect that DNA studies may (or may not) have had on constructions of Jewishness. In the following section I will focus on the way genetic research has been represented by geneticists in the mass media and in their interviews with me. I will then proceed to discussing case studies in the 'lay' perceptions of this research.

## GENETIC CULTURES AND JEWISH ORIGINS

The two articles mentioned at the beginning of this paper contribute to a sizeable body of genetic research that has endeavoured in one way or another to test the account of Jewish history, according to which contemporary Jews are genealogically connected to ancient Hebrews.<sup>12</sup> Both in their interviews with me and in the mass media geneticists involved in such studies have warned against using genetics as a means of identifying either an individual or a community as Jewish or non-Jewish.<sup>13</sup> I suggest that in their discourse, DNA is treated not as a marker of identification, but as a historical site producing 'artefacts' that could be placed in a 'Jewish museum' alongside items belonging to Jewish material culture, which would not necessarily be found in *every* Jewish household, but

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<sup>10</sup> Halakhah is collective body of Jewish religious law.

<sup>11</sup> Aliyah (Hebrew for ascent) is a term used to describe immigration of the Jews to the State of Israel.

<sup>12</sup> For a fairly detailed source of scientific paper and mass media articles on this research see <http://www.khazaria.com/genetics/abstracts.html>.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the mass media representations of genetics see Abu El-Haj 2004, Parfitt and Egorova 2006.

which nevertheless deserve 'museum space'. They were adamant that being Jewish could not be reduced to DNA and argued that their research aimed at providing additional evidence to tackle a riddle of history, which otherwise could not be solved by using conventional historical tools. Every scientist stressed in the interviews that being Jewish had nothing to do with genetics and that Judaism should not be understood as a religion centered around a particular 'ethnic' group. Many respondents emphasized that it was possible to convert to Judaism and acknowledged that not every person who considered himself or herself to be Jewish and came from a well-established Jewish community would have a genetic connection to the Levant. Thus, scientists appear to perceive and describe this kind of genetic studies as nothing more than a new tool for historical work that was going on anyway.

As I demonstrated elsewhere, genetic studies do not always reach a consensus about the way Jewish populations were founded (Egorova 2009a: 171-172). More importantly, so far professional historians have engaged with genetic research only to a very limited degree and normally refrain from using the findings of genetic anthropology as historical evidence. They argue that the way geneticists formulate their questions hardly makes genetic history relevant to contemporary historical research (Egorova 2010). However, papers in genetic anthropology have been readily accepted as the final word in the study of the formation of Jewish diaspora by those lay commentators who support the common origin model of Jewish history.

Research in Jewish genetics thus received a positive appraisal by Rabbi Yaacov Kleiman, the Director of the Centre for Kohanim. The aim of the Centre is to promote awareness of priestly heritage and duties among the Cohens and the Levites.<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Kleiman particularly welcomed genetic studies conducted on Jewish priests<sup>15</sup> and on the origins of various Jewish communities, and in 2004 published a book developing the idea that DNA research supports the Jewish historical tradition (Kleiman 2004).

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<sup>14</sup> The Cohens and the Levites are two priestly lines in Judaism. The status of a Cohen or a Levite is transmitted from father to son. [http://www.cohen-levi.org/the\\_center/the\\_center.htm](http://www.cohen-levi.org/the_center/the_center.htm).

<sup>15</sup> For scientific papers see Skorecki et al. 1997, Thomas et al. 1998. For a more detailed discussion of such studies see Abu El-Haj 2004, Parfitt and Egorova 2006, Prainsack and Hashiloni-Dolev 2009.



In the introduction to the book Rabbi Kleiman posits that until recently such questions were decided on the basis of faith, and 'belief in the Bible as God's revealed wisdom included a belief in its historical and genealogical accuracy' (Kleiman 2004: 9). However, now, in the 'age of reason', knowledge gained through science could shed light on the reliability of the Biblical tradition, he argues (ibid.). The book chapter by chapter goes through different genetic studies focusing on research on the Kohanim and on genetic relatedness of Jewish communities from different parts of the world. In Kleiman's view, they all support the Biblical tradition.

At the same time, throughout the book Kleiman insists that Jewish identity has little to do with genetics. He suggests that 'research results are of general interest regarding origins, ancestry, history – but are not applicable to individuals or communities in terms of their Jewish identity', which Kleiman describes as '*Metaphysical* and based on tradition, law, culture and custom and not *Physical* considerations (including DNA)' [emphasis original] (Kleiman 2004: 15). Quite apart from that, he stresses that anybody can become Jewish by converting to Judaism (Kleiman 2004: 21).

Like in the geneticists' discourse considered above, here, DNA research is depicted first and foremost as a source of scientific evidence, which allegedly validates the Jewish tradition, but should not be seen as a marker of identification. It may be suggested that in Rabbi Kleiman's discussion, the genes connecting contemporary Jews from different parts of the world to the Middle East are conceptualised more as historical artefacts rather than used as a litmus test for determining one's Jewish status. This is not surprising, given that genetic studies also clearly demonstrate that not *every* tested person from the Jewish communities appeared to have a DNA connection to the Levant. Thus, ironically, genetic interventions into Jewish history construct a genetic dimension of Jewishness, while at the same time demonstrating that many Jews lack any 'natural' link to the Middle East.

A very similar engagement with DNA research on the history of Jewish communities is demonstrated in the discourse of Shavei Israel (Hebrew for 'Israel Returns'), an Israeli NGO which aims to provide educational support and assistance in migrating to Israel for isolated Jewish communities, people who

rediscover their Jewish past, and groups who have claimed the status of the Lost Tribes, and those who wish to convert to Judaism.<sup>16</sup>

Members of Shavei Israel stress that Jewishness cannot be reduced to biology, and state that all sincere converts are welcome. At the same time, they are ready to consider genetics an important means of validating the Jewish tradition. As a Shavei Israel newsletter states commenting on the two studies published in 2010 (Atzmon et al 2010 and Behar et al 2010), 'As Jews, we have always been confident in the truth of our tradition, which is rooted in the Bible and in history, as well as in the heritage passed down to us across the generations. We can now add the laboratory to that list'.<sup>17</sup> Michael Freund, the chairman of Shavei Israel and the author of the newsletter, argues that these studies provide 'scientific validation' for Jewish historical narrative. Like in the book by Rabbi Kleiman, here, genetics is summoned to construct a collective past and to reinforce a particular account of Jewish history.

However, at the same time, the author explicitly dissociates himself from a position, which would use genetics as a measure of Jewishness. The article stresses that 'the Jewish people are about more than just genetics' and reminds the reader that Shavei Israel are open to those who 'wish to join the Jewish family'. This representation of the relationship between Jews and genetics reveals a complex mosaic of perspectives on the meaning of being Jewish, which both view the Jewish people as relatives AND insist on the cultural and religious (as opposed to genealogical) dimensions of the Jewish tradition. Like the previous commentator, the author is keen on de-biologising definitions of Jewishness, but at the same time is prepared to geneticize Jewish history to ensure that it acquires more weight in the eyes of those who doubt that Jewish people have a 'natural' connection to each other, to ancient Hebrews, and therefore, to the Land of Israel. Having a genetic connection to the Jewish people is seen by Freund as just one possible way of joining the Jewish tradition. For him, rediscovering one's Jewish past through genealogical research, or simply converting to Judaism, are equally valid ways of becoming Jewish both for

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<sup>16</sup> [www.shavei.org](http://www.shavei.org) (accessed on 17 August 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Shavei Israel newsletter, July 2010.

individuals and for communities.<sup>18</sup>

And yet, it appears that in some corners the biologisation of Jewish history effected by genetics will unavoidably create the perception that DNA could be used as a much more potent, if not critical, marker of identification. An interesting example of this comes from my ethnographic research on the Bene Ephraim of Andhra Pradesh (India).<sup>19</sup>

The community of Bene Ephraim was established in the late 1980s in the village of Chebrole of Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh by a group of Christianised Madiga Dalits (untouchables) who declared that they belonged to the Lost Tribes of Israel.<sup>20</sup> The group is led by two brothers who adopted the names of Shmuel and Sadok Yacobi. In 1991 they established a synagogue and introduced a number of Jewish rites into the practice of their congregation. At the moment, the Bene Ephraim number about 150 people who are in one way or another associated with the community and are willing to emigrate to the State of Israel. In their everyday life community members strive to observe Jewish dietary laws, rules of circumcision, the Sabbath and main Jewish holidays. For many of them adopting Jewish practice meant having to sacrifice Saturday wages, as the majority of the Bene Ephraim are agricultural labourers and are expected to work six days a week. Community members have been actively learning Hebrew and studying the Jewish tradition. One significant outcome of these practices is that many Bene Ephraim children and young people now consider themselves to be first and foremost Jewish, as this is the tradition that they grew up with.

In 2002 Shmuel Yacobi published a book entitled *The Cultural Hermeneutics*, offering an account of the history of the community, which may be summarized as follows. The Bene Ephraim descended from the tribes of Israel, who in 722 BCE were exiled from the ancient kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians. After their sojourn in Persia, they moved to the northern part of the subcontinent, which was then populated by Dravidian groups. In the seventh

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<sup>18</sup> Personal communication, July 2010.

<sup>19</sup> My research among the Bene Ephraim was funded by the Rothschild Foundation and by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (Ref. AH/G010463/1). The project employed Dr Shahid Perwez as a Postdoctoral Research Associate.

<sup>20</sup> For research on the Madiga see Still 2007. For research on the Bene Ephraim see Egorova and Perwez 2010 and Egorova and Perwez 2012.

century BCE, the subcontinent was conquered by the 'Aryans', who established the caste system and relegated the Dravidians and the Bene Ephraim to the positions of Shudras and the untouchables respectively. Both groups were later moved to the south of India, where they now reside. The current state of affairs in the community is explained as an unfortunate result of the further advance of 'Aryan rule', under which the Bene Ephraim lost their status and political significance, were reduced to poverty and, left with very few means of maintaining their tradition, almost forgot it. The book claimed that at the time of writing only a few Bene Ephraim were aware of their Israelite origin and they are now concentrated in Kothareddypalem hamlet of Chebrole village in Andhra Pradesh (Yacobi 2002).

It appears from the accounts of the Yacobis and of their village neighbours that the community began practising Judaism only in the late 1980s, however, the Yacobis maintain that their parents and grandparents had been aware of their Israelite origin and had practised Judaism in secret for a long time. The Judaisation of the Bene Ephraim has been dismissed by some commentators as an attempt by a former untouchable community to change its members' position in the local hierarchy, or to improve their material circumstances by moving to the state of Israel. The Yacobis stress that their low-caste status had nothing to do with the emergence of the Bene Ephraim. At the same time, Shmuel Yacobi explains that his research and activism towards finding the Israelite connection was partially driven by observing his fellow members' exploitation at the hands of higher castes. Embracing the Jewish tradition was his way to vocalize a protest against the social system that put his community at a disadvantage.

Anthropologists and historians of Judaizing movements have discussed a number of socially marginalized groups who, similarly to the Bene Ephraim, have reinterpreted their condition of discrimination in light of Jewish history. Some of them turned to Judaism because the historical experience of the suffering of the Jewish people seemed to mirror that of their own (Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002: viii). In the twentieth century a considerable number of Judaizing movements emerged in different parts of Africa, as well as among African American groups. It has been demonstrated that for some of these

groups, and particularly those that developed in the USA, embracing Judaism represented a protest against white supremacy and a search for new modes of self-understanding (Singer 2000, Markowitz et al 2003, Jackson 2005, Dorman 2006, Bruder 2008).

Similarly, the story of the Bene Ephraim suggests both desire to express social protest and a need to explore the past. The Jewish tradition is seen as a suitable means of satisfying both ends, and thus appears to be imbued with liberatory potential for socially marginalized communities. This case study reminds us that Judaism cannot be unproblematically described as an 'ethnocentric' religion. However, as I demonstrate below, it also illuminates the strength of the perception that membership in the Jewish community is based on Jewish genealogy and that in issues of Jewish identity arbitration 'genetic evidence' has a potential to give one's claims a degree of cultural weight.

Recently the leaders of the community suggested that the Bene Ephraim should undergo DNA tests to prove that they were Jewish.<sup>21</sup> They were convinced that, provided geneticists tested the right people in the village, the results would confirm their narrative of origin. It appears that the Yacobis would be willing to use DNA tests as a means of producing a piece of factual evidence for their origin narrative. This understanding of the role of genetics appears to go well beyond the assertions quoted above that these studies are of general interest regarding ancestry and history, but are not applicable to individuals or communities for the purposes of identifying them as Jewish. Ironically, the community whose story was supposed to challenge genealogical understandings of the Jewish tradition, chose to construe the Jewish people as a natural family and to use genetics to justify their place in it.

The Bene Ephraim were not the first Jewish community to see genetics as a means of external identification. The Bene Israel, another Indian Jewish group, had paid a great deal of attention to the outcomes of a genetic study conducted among them, and were delighted that the results turned out to be 'positive' (Parfitt and Egorova 2006, Egorova 2009b).<sup>22</sup> For both communities DNA identification becomes important in light of the fact that their early history

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<sup>21</sup> Sadok Yacobi, personal communication, December 2009.

<sup>22</sup> For research on the Bene Israel and the relationship between their Jewish and Indian heritage, see, for instance, Isenberg 1988, Weil 1994.

is not well documented. Both the Bene Israel and the Bene Ephraim perceive DNA as a marker of identification that external agents are likely to recognise as valid. How did Jewish genetics acquire the image of a tool for defining one's Jewishness? I suggest we can find one possible answer to this question, if we consider the importance that reconstructions of history are accorded in modern Jewish thought.

## **DNA AND COLLECTIVE MEMORIES**

Drawing on Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, anthropologist Tamar Katriel observed that the secularisation of Jewish history at the time of the Jewish Enlightenment involved a shift from a communal transmission of the knowledge of the past through ritual practices towards a historicisation of the past. This shift, in its turn, led to a quest for collective memories, which involved 'the emergence of newly constructed, ritually-enclosed memory-building practices' (Katriel 1999: 102).

Jewish genetics appears to satisfy both the traditional and the secular cultural quests for Jewish collective memory. Indeed, the commentators discussed in the previous section, present it both as an embodiment of the eternal presence of the past, and as a new site for collective memory-building. While geneticists see their research as a new tool for reconstructing Jewish history, for Rabbi Kleiman their findings are divine revelation and a confirmation of God's covenant with the Jewish people. 'In the history of mankind only the Jewish people has retained its genetic identity for over 100 generations while being scattered throughout the world – truly unique and inspiring. Perhaps, even more unique and inspiring, is that this most unlikely scenario expresses both a prophecy and a promise, he writes (Kleiman 2004: 35).

Jonathan Webber has pointed out that following the establishment of the State of Israel re-identifying as a historical people became part of Jewish self-understanding (2007). It is not surprising then that though the Yacobi family do not possess any material evidence of their Jewish origin or of their earlier practice, they feel under pressure to shroud their narrative in what Katriel has described as 'the rhetoric of factuality (1999). To give but a few examples, in

2002 Shmuel Yacobi published a book, which tried to provide historical and linguistic evidence for the antiquity of the Bene Ephraim (Yacobi 2002). Visitors to the community are often taken on a tour around the sites of ancient Bene Ephraim heritage in India. As DNA has become one such site of Jewish historical consciousness, it inevitably had to join the collection of artefacts documenting the community's Jewish past.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that both the Bene Israel and the Bene Ephraim have a strong sense of being Jewish irrespective of what their 'genetic profile' (endorsed by Western science) may be. As Tudor Parfitt and I suggested elsewhere, the Bene Israel used the results of DNA research to affirm their Jewishness in the face of those who doubted their origin, but they made it clear that they were confident they were Jewish no matter what the tests would have indicated. Moreover, they reinterpreted these results in light of their own tradition as proving the community to be the purest of the Jews (Parfitt and Egorova 2006). In the case of the Bene Ephraim, it appears that if a DNA study were to be carried out among them and its results proved to be negative, the community would be very unlikely to accept them. When I asked Sadok Yacobi about the possibility of genetic results turning to be negative, he replied that it was not possible, unless the geneticists were to make a mistake.

I argued elsewhere that though studies in genetic anthropology are interpretative by nature, they are perceived as hard science, which makes them a good rhetorical tool for asserting diverse historical and political agendas (Egorova 2009a, Egorova 2009b). In some situations genetic history may even be seen as a unique means for creating images of authenticity and asserting preferred historical memories. It has been demonstrated by social scientists that renegotiating history is often an important aspect of re-shaping collective identities (Baumann 2002, Webber 2007). This process undoubtedly works both ways. An encounter with a new historical 'fact' or a solution to the 'mystery' of community's origins - and it is such mysteries that genetic anthropology often strives to solve - can be expected to affect communal self-understanding, particularly if such 'solutions' are provided by those in the position of power. Geneticists can hardly be described as officialdom, however, they do present their work as a voice 'from above', a voice providing superior narratives based

on hard science and legitimated by the social capital that comes with academic positions, publications in prestigious journals and successful pursuits of funding opportunities.

At the same time, it appears that though DNA evidence IS widely used by lay commentators as a rhetorical means for inscribing identities, it is often used selectively to support the more favoured accounts about the origin and historical development of the tested communities. I suggest that the interest that the Bene Ephraim have expressed in embracing 'genetic history' indicates that while accepting its biological determinism, they also perceive it as imbued with liberatory potential. Communities like the Bene Ephraim and the Bene Israel struggle to produce material artefacts documenting their early history, and they feel that of all the items that a *bona fide* Jewish community would place in a rhetorical museum of its heritage, all that they can offer their interlocutors is their DNA. The gene emerges in the cases considered here both as an immutable determinant of identification imposed on the tested communities externally, and as a site of agency and resignifiability, where both scientific establishments and those undergoing tests construct their own historical narratives. Though community leaders seem to recognize the reductionist agenda of DNA research, they also see it as a potent rhetorical weapon to use against those who have raised doubts about their Jewishness, and as a last resort to prove their origin narrative. In their case, DNA acts both as a vehicle for transmitting a time-old naturalizing discourse of 'Jewish difference', and as a new, subaltern, means for social empowerment. However, the question that remains to be asked is whose voice is more likely to be heard in the mass media and to be taken into account in policy-making practices. Would the assertions of the Bene Ephraim about their genetic relatedness to the rest of the Jewish people have weight in the eyes of Israeli authorities? How much agency could they exercise in facilitating their migration to the Jewish State with or without 'genetic evidence' if the State were to decide against this migration? What other actors - apart from the scientists and the tested communities - are involved in creating and using the stories authorized by genetic anthropology? These questions will continue to require the attention of social theorists and to call an open discussion in the public domain.



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## ANNOTATED ESSENTIAL READING

- Abu El-Haj, N. (2007) "The genetic reinscription of race," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36, 283-300. (A comprehensive discussion of the social aspects of population genetic research engaging with issues of race and ethnicity).
- Egorova, Y. (2010) "DNA Evidence? The impact of genetic research on historical debates," *BioSocieties* 5, 3, 348-365. (A study of the relationship between genetic anthropology and history.)
- Parfitt, T. & Egorova, Y. (2006) *Genetics, Mass Media and Identity: A Case Study of the Genetic Research on the Lemba and Bene-Israel*, London: Routledge. (A socio-historical study of genetic tests conducted on two Jewish communities in Africa and in India.)
- Parfitt, T. & Trevisan Semi, E. (2002) *Judaising Movements: Studies in the Margins of Judaism*, London: Routledge Curzon. (An extended discussion of the 'emerging' Jewish communities.)
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## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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